We Stood in Hell

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We Stood in Hell

by houseofcannibals

Summary

France, 1916.

Submersed in the horrors of the trenches, Private Will Graham does not expect the survive the "Great War." Then a battlefield injury lands him in the care of Royal Army Medical Corps officer Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a man who sees him in a way that no one ever has before, and before long, Will has struck up an illicit relationship with the decorated medic. But can their forbidden love survive the brutality of war and the judgment of their superiors?

Notes

This is a WW1 fic and some characters will die, possibly ones you love. I hope you'll give it a chance, but do proceed with caution.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Siehst du? Siehst du?"

Will stared down at the man, his rifle trembling in his hands. For the first time since he arrived in France, the world seemed to have gone completely silent. No endless shelling or rattle of machine-gun fire. No buzz of insects or wittering chatter of bored, homesick men. Only the rushing of the blood in his ears. The dying murmurs of the German in the mud.

He hadn't stopped coming, even as the rifle blew chunks out of him. He had rushed at Will with his combat knife raised until Will emptied the gun into his chest, and even then he'd staggered forward a step or two with the blind madness of war in his eyes until his knees gave way beneath him and he slumped against the wall of the trench like a puppet with his strings cut, before sliding down into the mud.

Now he lay there, slouching like a drunk at the end of the night, the color rapidly leaving his cheeks. He looked remarkably human. Just a balding man in his thirties, his uniform turning black with blood. A man now fumbling something from his pocket.

Will raised the gun again, knowing it was empty. But the dying soldier was not reaching for a weapon. Instead, with fingers that shook worse than Will's, he removed a photograph and held it out.

Will hesitated a moment, then accepted the picture. In the dim light of the enemy trench, he could just make out the ghostly shape of a girl, dark hair, porcelain skin. Too young to be the man's wife. A daughter.

"*Siehst du?* " the man managed a final time, a trickle of blood running from his lips. Then he fell limp. The urgent look in his eyes gave way to… nothing. There was nothing. They were empty.

Will drew in a shuddering, gasping breath that made his chest clench. Suddenly, as though someone had dropped the needle on a gramophone mid-record, the sounds of the trenches came rushing back. Reinforcements would be coming soon. If they found him here, they would show no mercy. And yet, he could not seem to move an inch.

Will was never sure how long he stood there, staring down at the body of the man he'd killed… the first man he'd killed. It felt like an eternity. After a time, he became aware of movement in the trench, and then Crawford was standing in front of him, grabbing him, shaking him with both hands.

"Graham? Graham! We have to get out of here."

Will opened his mouth, but no words came out. He looked down at the body again. Crawford snapped his fingers in front of Will's eyes.

"Hey! Don't you go getting the shock on me, alright? We need to go, *now* ."

Then he grinned.

"Come on, Will — I need my beauty sleep! Let's go home."

Without waiting for a response, he grabbed Will's hand and climbed the nearest ladder two rungs at a time, hauling Will up after him. They emerged in No Man's Land, the mist swirling around them, mud squelching beneath their boots. The night smelled of smoke and blood.

"Keep low," Crawford murmured. "Quickly."

They began to move, sloshing through stagnant water as deep as their ankles. The blackened remnants of trees rose from the churned-up ground ahead of them like fingers from a shallow grave, whittled into gnarled points by shell fire. They were the only landmarks to be seen in the vast expanse of oily mud other than the crisscrossed lines of barbed wire that Crawford was now gingerly navigating.

"Come on," he whispered, holding up a section to aid Will's passage. Still, the wire snagged at Will's bicep as he clambered through, ripping his uniform and sending a wash of hot blood down his arm. Will barely felt it. He had killed a man. The shock had yet to wear off.

"Stay low and watch out for friendly fire," Crawford said. "Hurry now."

Crouching, they ran, out into the empty killing fields. Their trench was two hundred meters away. A hundred. Fifty. Will could see the parapets now, darker shadows against the black night. They were going to make it.

A sound from behind them, movement overhead, and then Crawford was tackling Will to the ground with a hushed cry — " *Down!* " — and Will landed face-first in the mud, feeling it clog his nose, press down his throat, but he could not have made a sound if he wanted to; Crawford's hand was now plastered over his mouth. No sooner had they hit the ground than a vivid star burst to life in the sky above, bathing No Man's Land in its sickly yellow light.

"Don't move," Crawford said through gritted teeth.

The light-shell rocket descended slowly on its parachute, arcing slightly in the breeze, and for the sixty seconds it took to extinguish, Will could not bring himself to breathe.

Darkness settled once more over No Man's Land. Crawford removed his hand from Will's mouth but made no attempt to get off him.

"Should we make a break for it?" Will whispered, shifting slightly beneath the larger man's weight.

Crawford hesitated, seeming to eye up the distance to the British trenches. They seemed tauntingly close… surely, if they sprinted… "No," he said. "We need to take cover. Come

on."

Rather than advancing toward their trench, he began to crawl toward a shell hole several feet away. Will tried to keep up, but his fingers couldn't seem to find purchase in the slick muck. Crawford disappeared into the hole, reaching out to drag Will in after him just as the next star shell exploded overhead.

Will slid into a pool of freezing water deep enough to drown a man. Shivering, he settled next to Crawford, who was sitting with his back against the wall of the crater, holding his rifle to his chest. The water almost reached their shoulders. They watched the rocket fall from the sky before either spoke.

"They're feeling us out," Crawford said. "Trying to gauge if all our boys made it across No Man's Land already. Waiting for us stragglers to make a run for it so they can gun us down."

"I'm sorry," Will said, very softly. "You'd probably be back already if you hadn't come looking for me."

"Captain Chilton's poor decision already cost us enough men tonight. I wasn't about to add to the pile."

"Still…"

"Enough of the pity party. We'll wait them out. No one else has to die tonight."

Will nodded and said nothing, but his shivering now had little to do with the cold. He was thinking of the balding man.

As if reading his mind, Crawford asked, "Was he your first?"

Will swallowed. "Yes."

"I'd like to tell you it gets easier. But I haven't found that to be the case."

"How many have you…"

"I haven't exactly been keeping count. But I've been out here for over a year. You do the maths."

Will didn't want to. He himself had held out for as long as he could. Accepted the jeers from strangers, the white feathers pressed into his hands by earnest women in the street. Even after the Military Service Act was passed in January of 1916, he clung to his teaching job to avoid conscription. But a few months later, they had come for him. All the brave, healthy young men were dead, entombed in mud in Flanders fields. He was totally functional and more or less sane. He'd do.

He had begged for a non-combat role, but that request fell on deaf ears. They had stretcher-bearers; what they needed was more cannon fodder. Before Will knew it, he was in basic training, learning how to dig trenches in the English countryside, marching endlessly in line through once-scenic parks, guns thrust into his shaking hands. Three months later, they

shipped him to Etaples for another month of field training at the transit camp, then it was off to the divisional depot to meet his new company on the reserve line.

Now it was December and here he was, freezing and frightened in No Man's Land, the blood of a German soldier still drying on his cheeks.

He thought back to basic training, to the eagerness of the men — lads, most of them, just turned 18 or willing to pretend they had, fresh-faced and hungry to prove their valor — who had signed up willingly. Of the dozen or so who'd joined his company alongside him, only three were still in France. One had been sent back to his mother a haunted and hollow shell of his former self, legs amputated three inches above the knee. The rest had gone home in boxes.

"We're all going to die out here," Will said.

Crawford glanced at him. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. I have a wife to get back to. That kind of fatalistic attitude gets people killed."

They lapsed back into silence once more. Minutes passed. Soon, Will's teeth were chattering so loudly that he felt certain the sound would carry to the German trenches.

"When-" he began.

"Wait," came the assured reply.

Moments later, another blazing rocket arched across the sky like a vengeful angel. Will glanced at Crawford and saw the man's eyes were closed, his face stoic and calm.

"You were made for this," he said when darkness had engulfed them once again.

Crawford huffed out a humorless laugh. "No one was made for this. But I trust my instincts. That's how I'm going to get *out* of this. I suggest you learn to do the same."

"My instincts sometimes get me into trouble."

"Look around. Can't get in much worse trouble than this. Not unless you find yourself in front of a firing squad."

Will wrapped his arms around himself, sending a cascade of black ripples out across the stagnant water. He was so cold he thought he might never be warm again. It felt like the icy cold had pierced his very bones and was seeping through the marrow like poison.

"Just a little longer," Crawford murmured, as if reading Will's mind. His tone was surprisingly kind.

Will looked up at the moonless sky, the indifferent stars, and thought of the man he'd killed, the daughter he'd left without a father. Was her mother still alive, or had he orphaned her? He closed his eyes and pictured her lying in her narrow bed, her slender body curled toward the window so she could see the stars, wondering if her father was looking at them, too. Saying a silent prayer for his protection.

Will opened his eyes. The stars looked on, cold and unblinking, trillions of miles away from the suffering of soldiers and daughters. Will supposed they'd seen worse. After all, the whole history of the human race was written in blood.

He was never sure how much longer they waited there that night, huddled and shivering in the flooded shell hole. It felt like hours, and perhaps it was. Eventually, though, Crawford touched Will's arm under the water to get his attention and gave a small nod.

They slithered out of the pit and began to crawl on their bellies, fingers dragging fresh trenches in the mud. The silence was thick as treacle, broken only by their ragged breaths, the sucking, squelching mud as it tried to hold them in place. It felt like they were the only living creatures in No Man's Land that night. Even the rats seemed to be holding their breaths.

Every few feet, Crawford would freeze and listen before gesturing Will on with a slight wave of his mud-caked hand. It seemed to take forever to cross the short distance to the parapets. As the coils of barbed wire rose out of the darkness in front of them, Will's fingers connected with something solid and faintly sharp in the mud.

He looked down, expecting a rock, and had to stifle a scream.

His fingers had pried between the blackened lips of a corpse; the sharp object he'd encountered was one of the man's canines. The body was almost entirely buried in a shallow grave of sludge, the back of its head blown off. The man had evidently been there for days. His eyes had been eaten by the rats.

Will pulled his hand back as if bitten, the scream still scrabbling to escape his throat. He had seen plenty of death while on the force — bodies slumped in litter-strewn alleyways, lying rigid on gleaming mortuary slabs — and plenty more since arriving in France. It wasn't the sight or even the state of the body that made him want to retreat into a dark corner of his mind and never come out, though it was almost too ghastly to process, with its ragged eye sockets leaking viscous fluid and its mouth full of mud. No. What made Will's sanity flicker like a candle in a drafty room was the simple thought that he'd spent years placing as much distance as he could between himself and crimes scenes after realizing that his relationship with death wasn't healthy, that something very bad would happen if he stayed in that world, only to wind up here with his fingers in a corpse's mouth.

Pain burst through his wrist. Crawford had grabbed him hard enough to bruise, hard enough to make Will's bones feel like they were grinding together. It had the desired effect; Will's mind ceased its frantic ricochet. He locked eyes with Crawford's.

"I know you want to scream," Crawford murmured, his lips barely moving. "Wait until we're in the trench. Can you do that?"

Will nodded, swallowing. Crawford regarded him a moment longer. Then he let go of Will's wrist and resumed his slow crawl forward, Will following a few inches behind.

Silence greeted them as they neared the parapet, but it was the pointed, watchful silence of an occupied trench.

“Hey,” Crawford whispered, just loud enough to carry. “Hold your fire. We’re friendly.”

Nothing. Then:

“That you, Crawford? Crikey, we thought you were a goner.”

“I’ve got Graham with me. We’re coming over.”

“Best be quick. Old Fritzie has gone quiet, but I doubt his finger has left the trigger.”

The barbed wire that crisscrossed in front of the trenches had been cut the night before in preparation for the disastrous raid. Will and Crawford slithered through a gap, not yet daring to rise.

“Okay,” Crawford murmured to Will when they reached the sandbags. “We go at the count of three before they have time to react to the movement. Understood?”

Will nodded. Crawford raised three fingers.

“One. Two. *Three* .”

Together, they pushed up onto their knees and lunged for the sandbags, sending several flying as they dived over the top. Will crashed into the rear wall of the trench and landed hard on his shoulder on the duckboards below, almost falling on his own bayonet. Crawford, surprisingly nimble for a man of such sturdy build, landed in a crouch beside him.

A single gunshot rang out; Will felt, rather than heard, the bullet pass by overhead. Then, silence once more.

Will sat up slowly, feeling every bone in his body creak in protest. His shoulder ached from where he’d landed on it, but at least nothing was broken. Nothing one could repair, anyway.

Crawford offered him a hand. Will accepted it gratefully and clambered to his feet.

Private Price and Private Zeller were perched on the firing step, staring at them as though they’d just dropped out of the sky… Which, Will supposed, they more or less had.

“Decided to go for a mud bath, did we?” Price said. He was a neat, quick-witted man of about forty who seemed to have one eyebrow permanently cocked. “Odd time for a spa day.”

Will looked down at himself. There was not an inch of his body that wasn’t caked in mud. He’d be cleaning it out of his ears for weeks.

“We need to check in with Captain Chilton, let him know we made it back,” Crawford said, ignoring Price’s comments. For the first time, Will realized how tired Crawford sounded and felt a fresh blade of guilt twist in his gut. “Do you know where he is?”

Zeller, the younger and scruffier of the two, gestured down the trench with his rifle. “Where’d you think? Probably holed up in the same dugout he was hiding in when we was risking our lives.”

“Come on,” Crawford murmured to Will, setting off in the direction Zeller had indicated.

“Don’t expect a warm welcome back,” Price called after them as they rounded a corner and disappeared from sight.

The first faint flickers of dawn lapped at the distant horizon as Will trudged after Crawford toward the officers’ dugout, shedding mud with every step. Soldiers lined the trench walls, some keeping watch, others huddled asleep in hollowed-out corners, on firing steps, on the filthy duckboards underfoot, their open mouths exuding frosted breaths. Will thought of the fear he’d seen in their eyes as they crept out into No Man’s Land just hours before, darker cutouts in the black curtain of night, their feet continuing to move despite the abject terror that pumped through their veins because their captain had ordered them, their king and country had called on them — it was their *duty* to walk into near-certain death in the vain hope that this senseless trench raid might expedite an end to this senseless war. Now they slept like children, their brows smooth of worry as they dreamed of better days. The ones who’d made it back, at least.

They reached the dugout, its entrance obscured by a ragged sheet of cloth. Crawford rapped his knuckles against the wooden frame and a clipped voice from within called, “Enter.”

The inside of the dugout felt ten degrees warmer than the trenches beyond. The walls were packed dirt reinforced with wooden planks. A single candle burned on the desk at the center of the small space.

Captain Chilton didn’t look up from the map he was poring over for a good minute after the men stepped up to his desk. When he did, his expression was not kind.

“So,” he said, removing his cap and placing it on the desk. The dark hair beneath was combed to within an inch of its life. Will wonder if his scalp bore permanent furrows from the tines. “You decided to rejoin us. I was about to label you deserters.”

Will chanced a glance at Crawford. The man’s face was like stone.

“We followed orders,” Crawford said. “Crossed No Man’s Land under cover of darkness. Made it into the enemy trench. Incapacitated the first sentries we encountered. Then someone raised an alarm and all hell broke loose.

“Our party got separated. Some of the men were forced deeper into the enemy trenches, Graham among them, while others retreated. I remained, locked in hand-to-hand combat. When I managed to overpower my assailant, I went looking for the others, those who hadn’t made it back yet, and found them all dead… Except for Graham. We attempted to retreat but the enemy was on high alert at this point. We had no choice but to wait and hope.”

Chilton raised a hand. “I didn’t ask for your life story, private,” he said, the hand now moving to his head, smoothing down his hair. “And if you think you’re going to get a medal for bringing back this one —” he gestured dismissively in Will’s direction without looking at him “— you are sorely mistaken. You were sent to capture maps. Not retrieve cowards.”

“With all due respect, *sir* ,” Crawford said, “Graham was standing over the body of the German he’d just killed when I found him. He was not hiding or cowering. He was doing his duty.”

Chilton shifted his gaze to Will. “So, you’ve finally had a taste of real combat, have you? How did you find it.”

Will thought of the look in his assailant’s eyes as the light had left them. He swallowed. “It’s the ugliest thing in the world.”

Chilton sniffed. “Spoken like a true conchie. You Oxbridge lot are all the same — privileged would-be philosophers who hadn’t done an honest day’s work in your lives before the war came along to strengthen your backbone. Isn’t that right?”

Will stared at him. He wanted to point out that he had been raised working class — painfully so — following his father through dockyards from Glasgow to Plymouth, wherever there was work going. That he’d only made it to Oxford on an academic scholarship after his father finally drank himself to death, working at the railway throughout his studies to keep food on the table, ignoring the titters of his classmates when he arrived in the lecture hall still in his overalls, his face streaked with grease, like father like son, because he hadn’t had time to change after cleaning an engine. That he’d gone toe-to-toe with violent criminals during his time on the force, even taking a knife to the rotator cuff, before being forced to step back because… because…

Because you were unstable. Dangerous.

No, that wasn’t it. What Will really wanted to say was that Captain Chilton had the soft hands and clean nail beds of a man who sits behind a desk and sips brandy while others are risking their lives on his orders.

He said none of this, however, and after a moment, Chilton went back to his map.

“Get out of my sight. And clean yourselves up, for God’s sake. You’re a disgrace to the king’s army.”

“Graham needs to see a medic,” Crawford said. “He’s bleeding quite badly.”

Will glanced down at his arm where the barbed wire had snagged him, realizing for the first time since leaving the flooded shell hole that it hurt rather a lot. He supposed he was in shock. He felt hollow.

“Fine,” Chilton said, without looking up. “But don’t think you’re getting out of your duties today, Graham.”

Crawford waited until they were well out of earshot before muttering something under his breath. It sounded an awful lot like “prick.

Will caught a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Captain Chilton really doesn’t seem to like me very much. He’s had it out for me since I arrived.”

“You went to a better school than him and he can’t stand it. I’d wager he applied to Oxford and didn’t get in. Still has a chip on his shoulder about it.”

“It hardly matters out here.”

“It does to a man like Chilton.”

Crawford stopped and pointed down the line.

“This is where I leave you. I need to catch some shut-eye before stand-to. Aid station is down there.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, and Graham? You’re no coward, you know that right?”

Will offered a tired smile. “You can talk. You saved my life tonight. You’re a hero.”

Crawford grinned. “Yeah, but as the Captain said, I’ll never win any medals for it. Take solace in the fact that you’re not the only one Chilton can’t stand.”

He turned and walked back down the trench, whistling, a lone Black figure in the mass of white bodies that occupied this strange, subterranean world. Will watch him go for a moment before continuing the way he was going, his boots sloshing through puddles of filth that he made no attempt to avoid. It wasn’t like he could get any dirtier than he already was. His wound was probably swimming in bacteria.

The dugout housing the aid station was much deeper than the one in which the officers looked at maps and casually discussed acceptable losses. Will descended the uneven stairs carefully, his eyes adjusting to the dimness, looking for Dr. Gideon. He’d only seen the Doc in passing, having escaped unscathed thus far, but he knew Gideon’s short, stocky frame.

The man he saw when he reached the bottom of the stairs was not Dr. Gideon.

“Just a moment, please,” the man said, without turning round. His accent was thick, European, though Will could not place exactly where. He was tall and slender, his head sleek as an otter. In the flickering lamplight, his hair looked like burnished silver.

Finally, he turned, and Will felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

“I'm Dr. Hannibal Lecter. How may I be of assistance?"

Chapter End Notes

I've wanted to write a story set in the trenches of WW1 for some time. Growing up in the UK, the "Great War" was a major part of my education; it left an indelible mark on our cultural consciousness, and I later studied WW1 literature extensively at university.

The trenches are a setting that's always interested me and I think they're fascinating and horrifying in equal measure.

That said, I wanted to proceed delicately with this story, because while this tragedy happened over a hundred years ago, it still happened. I erred on the side of wanting to convey the setting accurately. I wound up reading several non-fiction books on the topic before falling down a rabbit hole researching the forgotten history of queer soldiers. It was still illegal to be gay in Britain during WW1 and would remain so for decades after. Hundreds of soldiers were disciplined, even imprisoned, for so-called "indecency," while untold more fought and died for a country that didn't want them to exist. I think that's worth examining through a modern queer lens, even through a medium as "frivolous" as fic. While I am not (consciously) drawing on real soldiers' stories here, I do want to portray the senseless horrors of trench warfare as accurately as possible, though mistakes will inevitably be made.

The one exception I'm making to not drawing from any real people comes in the form of the title, which is taken from the Wilfred Owen poem "Strange Meeting." Incidentally, Owen himself is widely believed to have been gay based on his letters to Siegfried Sassoon and the homoerotic subtext in many of his poems.

Finally, if I make mistakes with my half-remembered German, please feel free to correct me and I'll update.

Chapter 2

“Where’s Dr. Gideon?”

The man who had identified himself as Dr. Lecter removed his gloves with a snap. “Somewhere in Britain, I imagine. He was granted leave.”

“Must be nice.”

“Indeed. But, I assure you, you’re in capable hands. I am the surgeon that the nurses call for at the casualty clearing station when all others have given up hope of saving a patient.”

“Well, happily I don’t need to be brought back from the brink of death. It’s just a flesh wound.”

Lecter beckoned Will closer with two fingers, reaching for a fresh pair of surgical gloves with his other hand. “I’ll be the judge of that. Remove your tunic, please.”

Will set his rifle down before getting to work unfastening the stiff buttons of his tunic. Clumps of drying mud crumbled beneath his fingers. A hiss escaped his lips as he peeled the wool from his wound.

“Caught it on some barbed wire,” he said as Lecter leaned in for a closer look.

“Then decided to crawl several hundred yards through the mud, by the looks of it. It’s horribly contaminated.”

“Sorry, I just couldn’t resist all that mud,” Will muttered. “Or maybe the *contamination* happened when I was taking a relaxing dip in the freezing pool of stagnant water out in the middle of No Man’s Land. Incredibly irresponsible of me, I know.”

Lecter did not acknowledge Will’s sarcasm. But perhaps his lips twitched, ever so slightly.

“I’m going to clean your wound with iodine before I dress it,” he said. “I’ll also give you a shot of tetanus anti-serum, just to be safe. You’ll be right as rain in no time.”

“Wonderful. I need to be in fit fighting condition if I’m to run headfirst into machine gun fire.”

Lecter just gestured toward a low stool — but Will got the distinct impression now that the doctor was amused.

He took a seat, shivering in the chill of the dugout. Removing his helmet, he pushed a hand through his hair. His fingers came away feeling greasy and damp.

He suddenly felt strangely self conscious, a sensation he hadn’t experienced in some time. Why would he, when every man he encountered was equally as filthy and foul-smelling as him?

But there was something about Lecter that made Will's spine straighten instinctively. It wasn't just that the man's uniform was eerily clean, his Royal Army Medical Corps armband standing out white as fresh snow against the dark khaki. It wasn't even the way he carried himself, though it was a far cry from the slouching, exhausted posture that characterized the troops, their backs bending under the weight of their heavy packs, necks permanently crooked from keeping their heads below the line of fire.

Something about him… Will couldn't put his finger on it.

He hissed again as Lecter pressed an iodine-soaked pad against his arm without warning. "This may sting a little," Lecter said.

"You don't say?" Will snapped, his nose wrinkling as the smell of the iodine nipped at his nostrils. "Guess you don't have much use for bedside manner at the clearing station if most of your patients are seconds away from death."

"On the contrary," Lecter said, dabbing at Will's wound, "manners are very important to me."

"They aren't worth much out here. Manners won't stop a bullet or slow the bayonet coming for your chest."

"But we can still be civil with one another. Perhaps even courteous."

"An infantryman can't be courteous. We were conscripted to kill and be killed. Not have conversations."

"You're conversing with me right now. Courteously."

"Well, that's… That's different. You're not trying to kill me."

Lecter removed the bloodied cotton pad and met Will's eye. "We live in primitive times, private — neither savage nor wise. It is our ability to have a civilized conversation like this, mere meters from the battlefield, that gives me confidence society will continue to move forward after this terrible war, not back. That you and I will be able to return to some semblance of our civil lives."

"My life wasn't civil before this. I investigated crime scenes, taught criminology. I thought about killing all the time long before anyone thrust a rifle into my hands and told me to point it at the enemy. Besides. I don't think I'm making it back."

Lecter, who was filling a syringe from a small glass bottle, did not look up. "Certainly not with that attitude."

Will stared at him, struggling to formulate a response. It was not until the needle was in his arm that he blurted out, "It's different for you. I'm not saying there's no danger at the clearing station, but it's a far cry from the front line. So forgive me for stating the very real possibility that I'm going to die out here. I'd go so far as to call it a *probability* , in fact."

Lecter's posture stiffened. For a moment, Will thought he might retaliate in some way for being spoken to out of turn. Some of the officers could be petty to the point of cruelty, especially those who owed their titles not to any real military prowess but rather their status before the war. The officers who were "gentlemen."

But Lecter merely removed the needle and set it aside, began to prepare Will's dressing. When he spoke, his voice was calm, measured.

"You're right, of course. Death was certainly closer to my thoughts at the start of the war, when I was part of an ambulance company at the front, before the powers that be recognized that my skills were better utilized at the clearing station, where I could perform more complex surgeries. But even then, I found the idea of death somewhat comforting. The thought that my life could end at any moment freed me to fully appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything this world has to offer."

"There isn't any beauty out here."

Lecter met Will's eyes again, and Will suddenly felt naked. "There's some."

Will swallowed. Lecter turned back to his work. After what felt like an eternity, he lifted a wad of wet gauze and carried it carefully over. The smell that emanated from it was that of a public bath.

"This will definitely sting," he said, and there was an unmistakable note of humor in his voice now.

"What is it?" Will asked, gritting his teeth as Lecter pressed the damp wad into his wound. It didn't just sting; it *burned.*

"Dakin's solution," Lecter said, winding a dry bandage around Will's bicep to hold the soaked gauze in place. "It will sterilize the wound."

Will nodded. He watched as Lecter finished applying the dressing, the man's hands moving gracefully as a pianist's.

"I shouldn't have implied that your work isn't dangerous."

Lecter said nothing. He pinned the bandage in place and turned back to his equipment.

"You didn't go to medical school for this," Will pressed on, feeling the words spilling out of him — as though, as one wound closed, another had opened. "You don't deserve to be here — none of us do. Even the man I killed tonight. He was probably just a father, a husband. He held some inconspicuous job — an accountant, or a construction worker, maybe. And suddenly, he was here, scared half to death, and some Tommy was in his trench with a gun, and he did what he had been told to do, what anyone would do in that situation. He defended himself. And I killed him for it."

Will paused, wetting his lips. His hands trembled where they rested on his lap.

"And the worst part of it? When I was killing him, it felt…"

“Good?” Lecter offered, his voice barely a whisper in the quiet dark of the dugout.

Will didn’t respond. He had said too much already.

A beat of silence passed between them. Then Lecter turned back to face him.

“I didn’t catch your name, private.”

Will hesitated. He was on thin ice with his commanding officer already; another black mark on his record was the last thing he needed. But lying wouldn’t help matters.

“Graham,” he said, almost a sigh. “Will Graham.”

“Well, Private Graham, you’re all set. If you could please return tomorrow, I’ll replace the gauze and make sure there are no signs of infection. There will be a scar, I’m afraid.”

“Another for my collection,” Will said as he slipped his arm gingerly into the sleeve of his tunic and began buttoning it up. “Thanks for the patch job.”

“Thank you for the conversation.”

Will gathered up his kit and headed for the stairs. With his foot on his bottom step, he turned, wanting to say more. But Lecter had his back to him now, his attention returned to his instruments. Will hesitated a moment longer, then began climbing the stairs.

The trenches were quiet as he emerged. It was still dark, but the sky was unmistakably lighter. Stand-to would be called any minute now. So much for getting any sleep before dawn.

Fastening his helmet back onto his head, Will began to trudge back to the sector where his company was currently stationed. His wound stang, a dull ache spreading through his arm from the tetanus shot. But his mind was elsewhere.

The front line was not a straight line at all, but rather a maddening series of firebays and traverses, crooked corners and sharp turns that meandered drunkenly across this once-beautiful stretch of countryside. The idea was that, should an enemy get into the trench, they couldn’t merely fire down the line and mow an entire battalion down where they stood. But for the soldiers forced to navigate them, this design only added to their exhaustion, making even the shortest journey feel like an endless trudge.

With every step, Will found his mind retreating deeper back into the dugout.

He wasn’t sure why Lecter had caught his attention in the way he had. Perhaps it was the fact that, in stark contrast to the constant stimulus of the war, Lecter’s stillness seemed almost preternatural. Or maybe it was the way Lecter had spoken to him, neither condescending nor cold like many of the other officers, but without sympathy, either.

Whatever it was, it had snagged Will’s hook and was holding fast. He felt a palpable tension in the invisible line that connected them.

He was so lost in thought that he almost collided with Lieutenant Tier when he rounded the corner of his sector.

Tier just looked at him, taking in Will's filthy uniform and mud-streaked face. Face unreadable, he pointed at the firing step where the other men were assembling, yawning and shuffling.

Will stepped up beside Zeller and readied his rifle. Then he remembered he'd emptied it into the German soldier. He fumbled in his ammunition pouch for fresh shells, trying not to think about the sound the bullets had made as they punctured the soldier's uniform and the soft flesh and organs beneath. He felt dizzy.

"You alright, Graham?" Zeller murmured. "You're looking a little green around the gills."

Will rested his rifle against the sandbags that lined the top of the trench and got into firing position, his eyes fixed on the receding darkness that lay beyond. "Lost a little blood. I'll live."

"That old sawbones Dr. Gideon give you anything for the pain?"

"Gideon's on leave. Some doctor from the clearing station is covering for him. And no, he didn't give me anything. Do they ever?"

"S'ppose not. We'd all become morphine addicts given half the chance. Anything to dull that nagging feeling that we're gonna get shot in the head at any moment."

Will huffed out a humorless laugh. "Dr. Lecter told me he finds the idea of death *comforting.*
"

He expected Zeller to laugh with him about that, but the man's ears perked up.

"Dr. Lecter? Isn't he that surgeon that got awarded the Victoria Cross?"

Will glanced at him. "Might be. I don't know."

"No, I'm sure of it. I remember 'cause he had a strange name."

"Hannibal."

"That's it! Sounds like a Jerry name to me but I guess he can't be given what he did."

"What did he do?"

"Ran out into No Man's Land under heavy machine gun fire and carried a man to safety when the stretcher-bearers couldn't reach him. Caught a bullet for his trouble. Then when right back out and saved another." Zeller shook his head. "Rather him than me. He can keep the medal."

Will stared out at No Man's Land. The sky was lightening now, turning from black to a dull, gunmetal gray. He could just make out the shape of the German parapets in the distance.

He imagined Lecter moving toward him through the gloom, a soldier slung over his shoulder, staggering slightly as blood poured from a wound in his side. Why hadn't Lecter said anything when Will accused him of having an easy time of it at the clearing station?

But of course, Will knew. The endless barrage of shellfire and shouting since he arrived in France had rattled his nerves, but it hasn't dulled his perception.

Lecter wasn't one to brag. He would consider that rude.

No one spoke again until the sun had risen, weak and watery, and the men were allowed to stand down. While the hour before dawn was considered one of the most vulnerable, forcing every soldier to be on high alert, the period that proceeded it marked an unofficial truce of sorts. No one ever attacked during breakfast.

While Price heated a canister of water for their tea, Will sat on the firing step and unwound his puttees. The mud had formed such a thick paste that they were practically glued to his calves. He removed his boots, peeled his sodden socks from his feet. The skin beneath was fish-belly white. He wanted more than anything to bathe and wash his filthy uniform, but that wouldn't happen until the company moved behind the line, still days away. For now, the best he could do was change his socks.

He was just replacing his boots when Lance Corporal Brauer rounded the corner carrying their morning rations.

"Grub's up, boys."

"Any bacon?" Price said hopefully.

"Only the finest for you, Jimmy," Brauer said, tossing a can to Price. "Bully beef and biscuit, your favorite."

Price caught it with a frown. "We haven't had fresh meat in four months," he grumbled — but he was already cracking into the can of corned beef.

Brauer finished handing out the meager meal before doling out the rum. Two tablespoons each, poured from a jar marked with the initials SRD — Special Rations Department. "Soon Runs Dry" the men called it, owing to the fact that it often seemed to go missing somewhere between the stores and the front line. Not today though. The men accepted it gladly, a few adding it to their tea in a vain attempt to mask the taste of petrol that seemed to linger in almost all water on the front that didn't fall directly from the sky. Most drank it straight, Will among them, feeling a warmth spread through him, both welcome and familiar.

Rations in hand, the soldiers drifted away to eat in peace or shoot the breeze with companions. Will settled down beside Price, Zeller, and Bernadone, the unofficial poet laureate of their company. Brauer leaned on the opposite trench wall, dunking his hardtack in his tea to soften it. This was the only way to eat the dense, salty biscuits unless you wanted a side of broken teeth.

“Chin up, lads,” Price said through a mouthful of corned beef. “We’re moving to the support line tomorrow.”

“Sure, where all the shells fall,” Zeller said. “Lucky us.”

He caught sight of Bernadone then, who was crumbling corners off his slab of tack and dropping them into a pocket of his tunic. A tiny pair of pink paws rose from the khaki to accept the proffered crumbs. Bernadone had caught the baby rat in the trenches a few weeks before. He’d named it Kevin.

“I can’t believe you’re feeding the vermin!” Zeller said. “They’re growing fat off the corpses of your comrades and you’re keeping one as a *pet* .”

“They don’t know any better,” Bernadone murmured. He was a quiet man. Delicate. “They’re just trying to survive, same as us. You can’t blame them for swarming to a food source, just as you can’t blame the flies or the lice or the maggots. They didn’t choose this war. Man is the only creature that kills to kill.”

He removed his notepad and pencil from his breast pocket then. Will watched him jot that insight down in his small, tight cursive: *Man is the only creature that kills to kill.*

Compulsively, Will’s hands moved to his own breast pocket. His fingers brushed the photograph that the German soldier had given him. He didn’t remember stashing it in there, but he supposed he must have.

He withdrew it, quietly hoping that it had been destroyed during his stint in the shell hole. He wasn’t sure he could face the girl’s accusing gaze. But the pocket had protected it; the picture was water damaged, but not so much that he couldn’t make out her face. Her expression was sober, somehow haunted. Her eyes seemed to follow him wherever he looked.

“That your sweetie back home?” Zeller asked over his shoulder.

Will tucked the picture back into his pocket. “No. I’ve never really been the ‘sweetie’ type.”

Price glanced at him but said nothing. Zeller continued, oblivious: “You live alone then?”

“Not exactly,” Will said, picking up his can of corned beef and staring hard at his fork, willing Zeller to drop the subject. “I rent a room from a woman.”

“Really?” Zeller shook his head. “I can’t imagine living under the same roof as a woman and not being married. Except maybe my sisters.”

“What about you — do you have a girl waiting for you?” Will asked, just to move the conversation along. His cohabitation with Alana Bloom, an arrangement born out of mutual understanding and convenience, was apt to raise more questions than answers if people looked too closely.

Zeller rubbed the back of his neck, a slight flush creeping up from his collar. “Not exactly. I mean, I’m waiting to see her again, but she doesn’t know that yet. She will though. First thing I do when this darned war is over, I’m going to march up to her front door with a bouquet of

daisies and ask her to accompany me for a stroll. No sense waiting, right? If I've learned anything out here, it's that tomorrow ain't guaranteed. If you wanna tell someone something, you've just gotta come right out and say it."

Price patted his hand. "Nice sentiment, kid. It isn't always that easy, though."

"Speak for yourself," Brauer said. "I'm a barrister on track to become a judge, and once I get back, I can add war hero to that list. I'll be fending women off with a stick."

Will sat back and listened to them talk and squabble, tell tall tales. It occurred to him that he'd never been this sociable before. Back home in England, he talked at his students, made small talk with colleagues in the halls, but he didn't have relationships. The closest he came was with Alana, not to mention her nighttime caller who was sometimes still there at breakfast. But their unspoken agreement to stay out of one another's business meant that their friendship remained forever at arm's length.

He had been lonely; there was no other word for it. And while he'd never be able to get close to these men, he could at least be social with them. Perhaps even friendly. They were eye deep in hell together, after all.

A light drizzle had begun to fall, along with the first shells of the day, as the soldiers wrapped up their meal and Lieutenant Tier reappeared to assign their fatigue duties. Will was sent to repair sandbags alongside Bernadone, and together they walked down the line, filling fresh sacks with soil and piling them atop the parapets, discarding those that had been lacerated by bullets or shrapnel in the night. Will found himself falling into a waking doze as they worked, lulled by the repetitive task, the soft murmurings of Bernadone as he workshopped lines of poetry aloud, occasionally pausing to write something down. Then a shell would explode in the near distance, dragging Will back to alertness, to the horror of where he was.

Finally, mercifully, he was relieved and allowed to rest. The rain had picked up steadily, the thick droplets hammering off his helmet like marbles. Will sloshed down the line until he found a shallow dugout that was unoccupied and lay down, setting his helmet aside and pulling his greatcoat over him for warmth.

Despite the cold and the rain, he was out in seconds.

He dreamt he was standing in No Man's Land. The fog was so thick he could barely see a foot in front of him, but he sensed he was not alone out there. Something was moving in the gloom, something primal. Something that made the hairs on the back of his neck prick up.

Will took a few stumbling steps forward. The fog swirled around him like some strange ocean of gray, its waves crashing through him, driving the warmth from his body. His footsteps made no sound in the emptiness. The silence was maddening; he wanted to call out, but it might hear him. The enemy machine gunners seemed insignificant for the time being. Whatever was out there was far more dangerous.

Will took another step forward — and recoiled. A figure had emerged from the fog in front of him, but its feet weren't moving and its eyes were the cloudy white of the dead. It was the

German soldier he'd killed. Will could see the holes that the bullets had driven through the man's uniform, the stains around them now dry and dark.

The German drifted to a stop in front of him. It observed Will for a moment through its sightless eyes. Then it raised a pallid finger to its lips, before straightening its arm to point at something off to its side.

Will turned. The fog seemed to part, revealing a corridor carpeted with mud and broken bodies.

Something was crouched over one of the corpses. Its skin was sleek and black, as though it had emerged from a pool of oil. Its eyes glinted like silver coins in its expressionless face. And as it raised its head, revealing an almighty pair of antlers, Will realized with horror what it had been doing with the body.

It was feeding.

He woke with a start, his pulse pounding in his throat. The rain had worsened while he slept; his fingers were numb with cold. Swallowing down his terror, he rolled over and managed to drift off once more. But his sleep was fitful after that.

He was awoken at dusk for dinner — a can of Maconochie stew with some hard tack and pozzy for pudding, washed down with petrol-smelling tea — before evening stand-to. When darkness had fallen and no attack materialized, Tier assigned the men their nighttime activities. Will was unsurprised to learn that he'd been assigned to a wiring party, one of the worst duties going. For the second time in 24 hours, he found himself in No Man's Land, now helping Price to carry a reel of fresh wire while Zeller crept after them, his face bone white in the darkness, a pile of metal pickets clutched to his chest.

For the next hour, Will and Price unspooled the wire as Zeller twisted the pickets into the ground, never speaking, barely daring to breathe, expecting the sky to light up or a shell to fall at any moment. But the barrage never came. The enemy was quiet, distant. When they made it back to their trench with all their limbs intact, Price joked that Jerry must have stepped out for a spot of sauerkraut. But Will could see in his eyes how frightened he truly was.

In the small hours, he found Tier hunched over the day's communications from command and requested permission to go attend to his wound. Tier waved him on without a word. His boyish face looked haggard in the lamplight. Will supposed his own appeared much the same.

He set off toward the aid station, his pulse seeming to quicken the closer he drew. An excess of adrenaline from the evening's activities, perhaps. Too much time in No Man's Land wasn't good for a man's heart. Or his sanity, for that matter.

The entrance to the dugout looked like a gaping maw in the darkness. Will stood staring at it for a moment before entering, fragments of his nightmare seeming to flicker in the corners of his vision. He was suddenly very aware of his breathing.

“Dr. Lecter?” he called as he descended the steps.

“‘Fraid not,” came the drawling reply.

Dr. Gideon stepped into view, wiping his bloody hands on his trousers. Behind him, an ashen-faced man sat in the corner, his head freshly bandaged, groaning.

“You can go,” Gideon said to the man without looking at him. The soldier rose and brushed past Will on the steps, stumbling and cursing on his way out. Gideon nodded at the vacated stool.

Will sat. “I thought you were on leave,” he said as he removed his tunic.

“I should be. Are you married, private?”

“No.”

“Then you won’t understand why a man would return to war early,” Gideon said. “You know, watching all this bloodshed day in and day out, sometimes I think it would be easier to kill her than divorce her. Shame about the kids, of course, but you know how it is with conflict. There will always be some collateral damage.”

He shook his head, looking wistful. Will felt a knot twist in his stomach. Gideon’s tone was light, jovial, but the humor didn’t reach his eyes. Will had spent enough time around murder to recognize when a man was building up to it. If Dr. Gideon survived the war, his family might not be so lucky.

It took all the willpower Will possessed not to recoil when Gideon touched him. When the doctor finished changing his dressing, he practically sprinted back up the dugout stairs.

Outside, he stood for a minute with his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. A nearby soldier on watch offered him a smoke and Will accepted it gratefully, quickly stamping out the match after it was lit. One had to be careful about matches in the trenches. They had a nasty tendency to attract German snipers.

As he walked back to his sector with the cigarette between his lips, he looked up at the stars and tried to rationalize why Gideon had bothered him so much. He was surrounded by death on every side. A bad joke about murder should blend in with the wallpaper.

Perhaps it was the fact that Gideon reminded him of his old life, when he had descended into the bowels of the Bethlem Royal Hospital to interview the most depraved killers London had to offer, men who didn’t rave and spit but rather spoke of murder as though commenting on the weather. Those were not days he cared to remember.

But deep down, Will knew it hadn’t been about Gideon at all.

He wasn’t feeling upset about speaking to Gideon, regardless of what the man had said.

He was disappointed.

Chapter 3

The rain fell in freezing sheets as Will's company shuffled their way down one of the thousands of communication trenches that snaked across the Western Front, bringing supplies and messages from command, replenishing the cannon fodder, and ushering the broken away with the promise of rest and reprieve, recuperation, before swallowing them up again.

The soldiers' heads were bent against the freezing assault from above. Their legs ached a little more with each step as they wrenched their boots free of the stinking, sucking mud only to bury them ankle-deep once again. No one spoke. They hadn't the energy.

Three days of nonstop rain had caused flooding and cave-ins in places, making the journey all the more arduous. Stretches of the trench had become so narrow that the men's shoulders scraped muck from the walls as they walked; in the near-total blackness, sandwiched between dozens of soldiers, Will felt his chest clench with claustrophobic panic until the gap widened out. In another section, a dip in the trench resulted in brown water pooling as high as the men's navels as they sloshed wearily through it, rifles held above their heads with arms that trembled as much from cold as from exhaustion.

But that was nothing compared to the area so thick with collapsed mud that the soldiers had no choice but to climb up and over, lifting their entire bodies above the line of fire for a few terrifying, breathless moments until they were able to slip and scramble down the other side. The night was very dark, and they were far from the snipers now — but not far enough for comfort.

Will's company had moved to the support trenches the day after his visit to Dr. Gideon. Since bombing the front line came with an increased risk of a shell falling short and damaging one's own trenches, the enemy tended to aim behind it, at support, which made for a particularly nerve-rattling experience. Indeed, the morning after they arrived, four men had been killed when a shell collapsed a dugout, burying them alive. As he helped to dig through the wreckage, Will had unearthed a pale hand that seemed to be reaching out to him, but when he grasped and pulled, he discovered it had been severed just above the elbow. He hadn't slept for two days after that.

When their time in support was up, the company had moved into close reserve. Now their rotation was finally taking them behind the line, where a man could get a good wash, a half-decent meal, and a proper night's sleep, if only for a few days.

Will felt a palpable change in the air as the first men in line reached the end of the trench and stepped out into the French countryside that lay beyond. A collective sigh of relief seemed to shiver through the company; backs seemed to straighten and heads lift; feet moved a little faster. Bernadone, a few paces behind Will, murmured "And with this reprieve, man renews himself; death, defeated, retreats for another day." Price, marching ahead, summed it up more succinctly: "It's about damn time."

A hot meal was ready for the soldiers at the camp, and while it wasn't much more to look at than the tinned slop they'd eaten for the last fortnight, they wolfed it down gladly, crowding into the large tent to escape the rain. With their superiors out of sight, enjoying the privacy of the officers' club, the rank and file soon broke out into bawdy song. Will listened with amusement as he slurped the broth from the bottom of his bowl, thinking about the shanties his father had taught him at the dockyard as he sat cross-legged with the man's big leather tool pouch spread across his small knees, passing his father the implements he needed as he worked. Those had been difficult days, lonely days. Now he had more companions than he knew what to do with.

Will wondered what his father would have said if he'd lived long enough to see his son conscripted. Probably nothing good; a chastisement for not signing up sooner, an accusation of cowardice, perhaps. Edward Graham had been a mean, bitter drunk, not afraid to beat lessons into his son with the sharp end of his belt. He could occasionally be kind when sober, even jovial — the shanties were proof of that. But he hadn't been sober often, especially toward the end.

Will swallowed the last mouthful of broth and set his bowl down with a clatter, scattering the ghosts of his past. His father was many years in his grave. No sense digging up the dead when there were far more imminent horrors to deal with.

The camp had been set up on the outskirts of a deserted village. Stepping out into the rain, Will caught sight of a ruined church silhouetted against the darkness, what remained of its spire jutting up like a broken tooth. He paused to look at it, wondering how many people had lived in the area before the bombs started falling — how it had felt to watch the jaws of war closing around their homes. Then he turned and headed toward the old farmhouse that had been converted into barracks.

A few men were already asleep, their snores drowned out by the relentless drumming of the rain on the metal rooftop. Will shrugged off his haversack, stepped out of his boots, and climbed onto the top bunk of a vacant bed.

The mattress was lumpy, but it wasn't a muddy trench. He was out almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

*

Weak winter sunlight splintered through the boards and fell across the straw-strewn floor when Will roused the next morning, feeling better than he had in weeks. The barn was quiet, almost empty. The rain had finally stopped.

He found Lance Corporal Brauer cleaning his boots outside the barracks. "Well, if it isn't sleeping beauty himself," the man said around the cigarette in his mouth. "There's hot porridge in the mess if you're hungry."

Will was indeed hungry, and the porridge was hot and salty. He sat outside as he ate, watching the kilted pipers from a Scottish battalion tuning their instruments, filling the air with a droning hum. "Forget bayonets," Price said, sauntering over to join Will. "They ought to run at the Germans with their bagpipes raised — that'd give 'em a good scare."

After breakfast, the men's uniforms were collected for a thorough washing. Brauer mentioned a nearby lake and, alongside two dozen other men, Will followed in his undergarments as the Lance Corporal led them through the woods. The mood was jubilant, boisterous, and their laughter and song pealed through the quiet morning like church bells:

"If the sergeant steals your rum, never mind,

"If the sergeant steals your rum, never mind,

"Though he's just a bloody sod, let him take the bleeding lot,

"If the sergeant steals your rum, never mind!"

The men paused on the grassy banks of the lake, staring out at the black, still waters. "How cold do you reckon it is?" Zeller asked, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Only one way to find out," Price replied. But he made no move to approach.

Men were nudging and daring one another when Lieutenant Tier emerged from the trees. He walked past them all and into the lake without saying a word, stopping only to step out of his boots.

After that, they all followed in a rush, obscenities and laughter filling the air as they waded into the chilly waters and dunked their heads, splashed their comrades, practiced their backstroke under the cloud-strewn sky. Stripped of the mud and filth of the trenches, they looked very young. A group of schoolboys playing after class, their whole lives lying ahead of them like an untouched banquet.

Almost all would be dead within a year.

Will floated on his back a little away from the others. With his ears below the surface, the world had taken on a strangely muted quality. He watched a flock of birds take flight from a nearby tree and found his mind wandering, as it so often did lately, to his encounter with Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

He supposed it was normal to fixate on the sole spot of color in an otherwise bleak landscape. Amidst the muck and the exhaustion and the mind-numbing routine, Dr. Lecter stood out like a peacock in a sea of pigeons.

His wound, well on its way to puckering into an ugly scar, began to itch. Will reached over absently to scratch it, thinking about how warm Lecter's fingers had felt against his frozen skin.

They hadn't finished their conversation. That was the worst of it. They had started to talk about the killing of the German soldier and how it had felt, and Lecter had looked him in the eye and whispered the word on the tip of Will's tongue, the word he didn't dare say out loud — *good?* — and for the first time in his life, Will had felt like someone actually understood him, actually *saw* him for who he was, for all that he was…

And then he'd left.

Why had he left? He could have made an excuse, lingered longer. Said more.

But to do so would have been dangerous. He knew that. He'd known that all his life.

Sighing, Will lifted his head out of the water. The sounds of merriment flooded back into his world, but he still felt detached from it, as though he were watching the other men from behind a pane of glass.

He caught sight of Crawford wading toward him.

"You looked lonely, thought you might want some company."

"Just lost in my own head."

"Thinking about home?"

"Not exactly."

"That's all I can think about," Crawford said, his expression growing wistful. "Did I ever show you a picture of my wife, Bella? I swear, she's the only thing that keeps me going some days. Whenever I think I can't go on, I try to focus on the little things, like the little crease that forms between her eyebrows when she's doing a crossword or how her skin smells when she's just come in from the garden." He sighed. "This will be our first Christmas apart since we met. I've been thinking a lot about that, too."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You didn't start this bleeding war. I'm sure you've got people waiting for you back home as well."

"Not really. Not people, anyway."

"What?"

"Dogs," Will said, scratching his head and staring hard at the tree line, avoiding Crawford's inquisitive gaze. "I'm sure my dogs miss me, at least. Although my landlady and her partner have probably been spoiling them in my absence. They may not even notice I'm gone."

Crawford was silent a moment before deciding that Will was joking. He laughed and clapped Will heartily on the back, almost knocking the slighter man off his feet.

"You're a curious man, Graham. I hope we can keep in touch after this, if we…" He trailed off, swallowed, and artfully changed the subject. "Looks like the lads are ready for a chicken fight. Fancy a game?"

Will glanced at him, grateful for the branch of friendship that Crawford was extending to him but utterly incapable of grasping it.

"You go ahead. I'm getting cold. Might return to camp in a minute."

“Suit yourself,” Crawford said, nudging Will’s shoulder with his fist before swimming back to join the others. Will watched Zeller climb onto Crawford’s shoulders, grinning and pushing the wet hair out of his eyes as they squared off against Price and Brauer. Within seconds, they had sent Price tumbling into the water. As he emerged, he too gestured for Will to join them, but Will shook his head, feigning a smile.

As the game resumed, Will turned his back to it and waded deeper into the lake. He thought again of Lecter’s hands against his skin, the way Lecter’s hair had looked like silver in the lamplight. Then he sank down into the water until his head was fully submerged.

*

It was either very late or very early, depending on how one looked at it. Soft snores filled the barn as Will lay on his bunk, staring at the photograph of the German soldier’s daughter. He couldn’t make out her features in the darkness, but he saw her all the same. Her solemn face was etched behind his eyes.

A day had passed, then two. The giddy relief of arriving behind the line had softened into a brooding reverie as Christmas edged ever closer. While it would certainly be better to spend it here than in the trenches, the thought of their families waiting for them at home weighed heavily on the men. A place at the dinner table would sit empty. Wives would go unkissed under the mistletoe. Children would cry when their wish to see their daddy didn’t come true.

Seeing his fellow soldiers’ heartache almost made Will grateful to be alone.

Almost.

On the lower bunk, Bernadone mumbled something in his sleep and rolled over. Will folded his hands over the photograph and closed his eyes, willing sleep to find him, but it didn’t. After another hour of tossing and turning, he finally gave up, kicking back the sheets and dropping lithely to the ground.

His bare feet made no sound as he padded out of the barn and into the chill of the morning. The sky was cloudless and bright with stars, the moonlight illuminating Will’s path as he set off toward the lake, wrapping his arms around his chest. A twig snapped underfoot, loud as a gunshot in the quiet. An owl hooted furtively in the trees nearby.

A membranous mist lay over the surface of the water that morning. Will paused on the grassy bank, savoring the crunch of the frost beneath his toes, before crouching to remove his undergarments. The other soldiers wouldn’t wake for hours. No sense walking back to camp in wet pants if he didn’t need to.

The mist seemed to ripple around his ankles as he stepped into the icy waters. He allowed his body a minute to adjust to the cold, then waded in deeper and dunked his head before he lost his nerve. He emerged gasping and blinking a moment later, a startled laugh escaping his throat. It was the first time he’d laughed, truly laughed, since arriving in France.

He swam laps for a time, alternating between a gentle breaststroke and a more vigorous front crawl. When he grew tired of that, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the scattering of

stars. They seemed far more benevolent out here than they had from No Man's Land. Will supposed all things held the capacity for beauty and ugliness; these qualities co-existed without friction or contradiction, for one could not exist without the other. He knew too well how it felt to do ugly things and yet feel…

Good?

Quite suddenly, Will became aware that he wasn't alone in the clearing. He stood up fast, causing the mist that had formed around him to retreat in rolling waves. His pulse was pounding in his throat.

Dr. Lecter was standing at the water's edge. For a few seconds, Will entertained the idea that he was dreaming; that he had, perhaps, fallen asleep after all and only imagined walking to the lake. But the sting of the cold was too acute, the sensation of the water against his skin too real. He was wide awake, and Lecter was here.

The doctor glanced down at the undergarments thrown carelessly on a rock, then back at Will. Slowly, he began to undress. Will watched him slip out of his burgundy robe and fold it neatly, placing it on the rock. Then Lecter started to remove his pajamas.

Will turned his face away. He waited until the pale figure in his peripheral vision had waded waist-deep into the water before turning back to look at him.

"Not comfortable with nudity, private?" Lecter called out as he approached.

Will felt a flush creeping up his neck, despite the cold. "Trying to be polite, I suppose."

"Ah. Sometimes politeness is overrated, don't you think?"

"I thought manners were very important to you."

That slight smile tugged at the corners of Lecter's lips. "Don't mistake prudishness for manners. Manners allow us to move through the world more seamlessly. Prudishness prevents us from having any fun while doing so."

"Fun. Haven't experienced that in a while."

"Not a great deal of options for it out here," Lecter said. He moved closer to Will, until only inches separated them. "Though I can think of a few."

Will felt his flush deepen. He glanced away again, swallowing. "I can't imagine I know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come now. You don't seem like a man troubled with a lack of imagination. What was it that you said to me in the aid station? *You thought about killing all the time* . That takes imagination, at least for most people."

Will stared down at the dark waters, seeing his own face, pale and miserable, staring back at him. "Surely you can appreciate, then, why I don't like to strain my imagination when I don't need to."

“Because it frightens you.”

“Fear is the price of imagination.”

“That’s very true. But without it, we’d be like all the other dullards.”

Will looked up. “We?”

Another flash of that faint smile. Then Dr. Lecter was off, falling into a graceful backstroke that looked as effortless as breathing.

Will swam out a little deeper and trod water, watching. The strands of silver in Lecter’s hair were even more striking and beautiful in the moonlight. Will wondered how old the doctor was. Older than him, certainly, though Will was older than he looked; he was pushing thirty but his boyish looks had yet to fade. He placed Lecter in his early forties.

Old enough to know better.

After several laps, Lecter paused for breath beside the bank. He stood half in and half out of the water, his back to Will. He had a dancer’s body, lithe and deceptively muscular. Wasted beneath a uniform.

Will swallowed, his discretion crumbling. He found himself unable to tear his eyes away from a bead of water as it ran down Lecter’s back, meandering around the ragged scar left behind by a bullet, down the smooth curve of the doctor’s buttock —

“I didn’t expect to see you again,” he said, a little gruff.

Lecter turned. “The casualty clearing hospital is on the other side of the village. I come here often when I can’t sleep. What few moments of peace and tranquility we can find during wartime must be cherished.”

“I’m sorry for disturbing your peace.”

“Don’t be. I’m enjoying the company.” Lecter gestured at the bank. “The water is terribly cold this morning, however. Shall we dry off?”

Will nodded, his mouth very dry. He watched as Lecter lifted himself out of the water before swimming slowly to the bank.

Lecter was sitting on the grass, one leg curled under him, the other bent, his elbow resting on his knee and his fingertips pressed lightly to his temple, watching. The hair on his chest and between his legs was dark, beaded with pearls of water. He made no attempt to cover himself.

Will put his hands on the grassy bank and pulled himself up. On his knees, he paused for a moment, feeling as though he was standing on the precipice of some great gorge — one that, once crossed, offered no means of return. Then he climbed to his feet and met Lecter’s eye, his hands dangling, relaxed, by his sides.

Lecter observed him with the cool interest of a collector at the auction house. Then he patted the grass beside him.

Will sat. Lecter picked up his dressing gown and draped it over their shoulders. His fingers brushed the fresh scar on Will's bicep, making him shiver.

"Your wound has healed well," Lecter observed. "The scarring is minimal."

Will ducked his head, suddenly embarrassed. "I couldn't help but notice the scar on your back. I heard the story of how you got it."

"Greatly exaggerated, I'm sure."

"I heard you were shot while carrying two men to safety."

"I was." Lecter touched his abdomen, his finger circling another scar. "But the bullet went right through me and missed all the major organs. I was very lucky. I can't say the same for the men I was carrying."

"Why did you do it?"

Lecter shifted his weight slightly, casting his gaze out across the misty lake. "Hard to recall. Duty to king and country, I suppose."

Will knew he would regret the next words out of his mouth — Lecter was an officer after all and could get him into a lot of trouble for even hinting at a lack of conviction in the war efforts — but he couldn't stop himself. "Poppycock. Why did you really do it?"

Lecter looked at him — really looked at him — then, and Will had the uncomfortable sensation of a fly buzzing around in the back of his skull. "Quid pro quo, private. I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

It was Will's turn to stare hard at the lake. "You know my story. I cut myself on barbed wire in No Man's Land."

"While fleeing the German trench where you had just killed a man. Was he your first?"

Will swallowed. "Yes."

"Out here or ever?"

"He was the first."

Lecter nodded thoughtfully. "But you've thought about killing before. You think about it all the time."

"It was my job."

"But no one forced you to enjoy it."

Will looked up at him. “I didn’t enjoy it.”

“Then why did killing the German feel so good?”

“I didn’t… I didn’t say that.”

Lecter’s eyes bored into his. Will found himself longing for the glasses he’d sometimes worn in his classroom to discourage eye contact. He had once explained to Alana that he disliked eye contact because eyes were distracting; he would see too much in them, or not enough. But Lecter’s eyes were wholly unreadable and Will suddenly had the impression that his own were an open book.

“I imagine that killing him felt just,” Lecter said. “He was the enemy after all; no one could fault you for doing it. And that’s why you also feel bad about it. Because you would have liked killing him even if he wasn’t.”

“I didn’t…”

Lecter raised a hand, stifling Will’s weak protests. “Six thousand soldiers are dying in the mud every day,” he said. “God won’t notice one more body on the pile.”

Will looked away again, thinking of the jaws that had once belonged to a man and now belonged to the mud that had snared his hand out in No Man’s Land. “God isn’t here.”

He felt Lecter’s fingers on his cheek, turning his head back until their eyes could meet again. “Of course he is,” Lecter said, his gaze steady, intent. “God’s terrific. He drops church roofs on his worshippers while they’re singing hymns. He’d love this.”

With that proclamation, he climbed to his feet and reached for his clothes.

“I should get back to the hospital,” he said as he stepped into his pants and shimmied them up his hips in one fluid motion. “When does your company return to the front?”

“Boxing day.”

“Then perhaps you’d care to join me for Christmas dinner, if you can get away from your men. The food won’t be much to write home about, I’m afraid — same old rations as always — but I have a spot of brandy I’ve been saving.”

Will handed Lecter his robe and watched him slip into it. “I’d like that.”

Lecter smiled. Will felt his insides turn to water.

“It’s a date, then.”

He turned to leave but had walked only a few steps when Will called out to him.

“Quid pro quo, doctor. I told you mine. Why did you risk your life saving those men?”

Lecter paused but did not turn around. “I suppose that, sometimes, saving lives can be just as arousing as taking them,” he said. Then he disappeared into the trees before Will had time to process the implications of that statement.

*

He was crouched in a narrow sap that extended out into No Man’s Land, keeping watch. The night was quiet, starless. A creeping mist blanketed the mud.

Something was moving.

Will squinted into the periscope, scouring the darkness for the antlered creature he had seen in his nightmares. Instead, he saw Dr. Lecter. The doctor’s face was pale and mud-streaked; blood poured from a wound in his side. An injured soldier hung like a ragdoll over one shoulder. Lecter was staggering slightly under the man’s weight.

Will blinked. Lecter was crouching over the soldier now, his skillful hands pressing on the man’s chest. As he lowered his mouth to breathe air into the soldier’s lungs, Will felt something cold alight on his shoulder.

He jerked and spun around. The German soldier he’d killed stood behind him, eyes clouded with the terrible knowledge of death. The flesh on his cheeks and neck was dappled with rot. As Will watched, a maggot wriggled free of one of the bullet holes in the man’s chest and fell into the mist swirling around their feet.

“Siehst du?” the man rasped, more maggots tumbling from his blackened, mud-filled mouth. *“Siehst du?”*

Will turned back to the periscope, his heart suddenly thumping painfully hard in his chest. The injured soldier still lay out in No Man’s Land, but it was no longer Dr. Lecter crouched over him. And as the antlered creature raised its terrible eyes to look at Will, he saw the blood dripping from its chin —

Will opened his eyes. Daylight poured through the slats in the barn. It was Christmas Eve and he was still behind the lines. Safe.

Close to Lecter.

Three days had passed since his encounter at the lake and he had thought of little else. Time behind the line was time to oneself, so there had been little to distract him. He had sat beside his comrades as Bernadone wrote or Price sketched or Zeller and Crawford played cards, all losing interest in conversation with him when they realized he was lost in his own head. Twice, he’d returned to the lake, but Lecter had not come.

As he ate breakfast that morning, he recalled a conversation he’d had with Alana shortly after he moved into her home. She had been sitting in her breakfast nook with a cigarette in one hand and black coffee in the other, her dark locks still twisted up in her silk sleeping turban, watching him as he cooked kippers in a pan.

“Do you know why I chose you for the room, Will?” she asked.

“Because I could pay the first two months upfront?”

She’d laughed. “That certainly didn’t hurt. But I saw something in you that I didn’t see in the other applicants.”

“What was that?”

She set her coffee cup down and took a slow draw from her cigarette before replying. “I believe you, more than most men, understand the importance of being *discreet* .”

He’d glanced over his shoulder at that, then busied himself with plating the fish. “In what sense?”

“Let’s not pussyfoot around the issue. I am a woman with certain… *proclivities* … that our peers might not understand. But I think you do. I think you understand that notion intimately. Am I wrong about that?”

Will paused with his back to her, holding his plate very tightly. Then he turned and carried it over to the table, setting it down opposite Alana. “You’re not wrong,” he said softly, taking a seat and picking up his fork.

Alana nodded thoughtfully. Her demeanor was casual, but Will sensed her immense relief.

“Good. So we understand one another. I will appreciate your discretion when I have certain… callers. And you will receive discretion in return should you decide to… bring someone home.”

Will tucked a forkful of food into his cheek and chewed slowly. “I don’t imagine that that will happen any time soon.”

Alana smiled then. She was truly radiant when she smiled.

“I think you’re selling yourself short,” she said, returning to her coffee. “It’ll happen, always does. Probably when you least expect it.”

Sitting on a tree stump outside the barracks with a bowl of hot porridge clutched in his cold hands, Will found himself smiling at the memory. He and Alana had never addressed their *proclivities* again, beyond exchanging a knowing glance when a mutual acquaintance had once commented on the possibility of them getting together someday. But he’d sensed her continued interest in him. She was an intelligent woman, too intelligent for the bonds of polite society; she’d seen right through the front he put up. He wondered what she’d say if he told her about Dr. Lecter. *I told you so* , probably.

He heard a commotion then and looked up. Lieutenant Tier was striding out of the mess hall with a stony-faced Brauer at his heels, the sounds of outrage ringing after them.

“Pack up your kit,” Tier said without slowing his pace. “We’re returning to the front.”

Will felt the bowl slip from his fingers. “I thought-”

“You thought wrong,” Tier snapped, disappearing into the command tent.

“They’ve sustained heavy losses from shellfire,” Brauer said, looking glum. He seemed to have received the news mid-shave; one cheek was still dark with stubble. “Chin up, old chap. It’s not like we had Christmas plans.”

He followed Tier into the tent, leaving Will to stare at the porridge pooling around his boots.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The journey back to the front lines was a solemn one. The men would usually sing to pass the time while they marched, simple, sardonic ditties about how tired they were, how fed up, how much they wanted to go home. But no one was in the mood that day.

The mud was so thick and dense that the support trenches had become virtually impassable since they last traversed them. Will couldn't even tell if his boots were touching the planks that had been laid down; he was encased in sludge up to his knees. It seemed to take hours to slog each hundred feet. Before long, Will's legs had become so tired that he was certain the mud was the only thing holding him upright.

The closer they got to the front, the worse the smell became. Decay, bodies rotting in the fields by the thousands. Will had smelled decomposition before the war, but nothing like this. It seemed to permeate one's very pores, clinging to the nose hair, exuding from clothing with the slightest movement. Will thought he could bathe a thousand times over and never be rid of that stench.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the front line. In the lamplight, Will caught a glimpse of the company they were relieving as they passed. The men's faces gave the impression of wax masks, sallow and lifeless. They shuffled like dementia patients, hands visibly trembling where they clutched their rifles. One gibbered incoherently. Another cried for his mother. The rest were silent as the dead.

It did not take long for them all to pass. Many had gone ahead on stretchers. Under sheets.

The trenches were in bad shape, but there wasn't much that could be done about it in the dark. Tier allocated their nighttime duties and the men glumly made their way to their posts. For once, not a single complaint could be heard.

As Will settled in the sap he had been assigned to, he wondered if word had reached Dr. Lecter that their battalion had been sent back early. There had been no way to send a message to him at such short notice, certainly not discreetly. Was he at that very minute laying a table for two, his long fingers carefully folding the napkins, straightening the cutlery, trying to make a meager meal of rations feel like a feast? Will wondered what Lecter's quarters looked like, where he slept. Quite suddenly, he found himself close to tears.

Perhaps it had been for the best, he thought, pulling his greatcoat closer around him to stave off the bitter chill. It would have raised questions if they had been caught.

Best not to get too close.

*

Will woke from fitful dreams to the sensation of needles lightly pricking his face.

He opened his eyes. It had started snowing while he slumbered; a light layer dusted his greatcoat already. A white Christmas. It would have been quite magical if it had occurred almost anywhere else.

Clambering off the ledge where he'd stolen a few hours of sleep after being relieved from watch, Will shook the snow off his coat and swung it over his shoulders. His legs trembled with fatigue from the previous day's march; his fingers were stiff with cold. He knew there was a long day of hard labor ahead — collapsed trenches to be repaired, bodies to be uncovered from dugouts that had become tombs when the shells fell — but that could wait, at least for a little while. It was Christmas morning and time for breakfast.

The men in his section were huddled together on a firing step, cradling cups of tea in their cold-ruddy hands. Will nodded in greeting as he joined them and took his own tin cup out of his pack, murmuring a few words of thanks as Crawford filled it with the last of the morning's hot water. Will dropped a couple of tea tablets in and stirred, watching the pallets dissolve before taking a sip. The bitter taste of petrol coated the back of his throat. He went in for another sip regardless, grateful for the warmth.

"Well, aren't you lot a sight for sore eyes?" Lance Corporal Brauer said as he approached. His tone was genial, but Will could see the strain behind his usual easy smile. "Where's your Christmas spirit, chaps?"

"Must've left it behind the lines," Price muttered.

Brauer made a small sound of pity. "Then you won't be wanting this then, I suppose?" he said, lifting the corner of the cheesecloth-wrapped package he was carrying.

Price's head shot up. "Is that bacon?"

"Old Saint Nick must've gotten our forwarding address after all," the Lance Corporal said, tilting the package to show them its contents, pink and glistening with fat, the most heavenly sight a hungry soldier could imagine. "And it wasn't easy to get hold of so you'd better be bloody grateful for it."

They were, waiting enthusiastically for their turn to cook the meat in their mess tins, burning tiny scraps of wood in the firepit to minimize the smoke. There was enough for two rashers apiece, along with a piece of hardtack, a tin of boiled plum pudding, and even a double-ration of rum, doled out by Brauer with a wink. For a while, the only sounds were their contented chewing, the scrape of their utensils as they rounded up the crumbs. The smell of cooked meat lingered teasingly in the air long after it had vanished from view.

"It true there was a truce that first Christmas?" Crawford asked when all the food was gone.

Brauer, now sitting on the muddy boards with his legs stretched out in front of him and a cigarette dangling from his lips, nodded. "I was in Flanders at the time. We walked out into No Man's Land as if it were Hampstead Heath. I don't know which brave soul made the first move, if it was us or them. All I remember thinking is how normal the Boche looked up

close, not at all like I'd imagined them. They were so… young. We played footie with a can of bully beef and exchanged souvenirs, coins and trinkets and the like. I still have a postcard of the Rhine in my pack. Then night fell and we went back to our trenches to resume shooting at one another."

He shook his head, taking a long draw from his cigarette and exhaling the smoke in a sigh.

"We'd all been told this would be over by Christmas. Now here we are again, three Christmases in and still no end in sight. Perhaps by next year."

"Why did you sign up?" Will asked quietly. "That was long before conscription. Why did you volunteer?"

Brauer scratched his chin. "Feels foolish to think back on it now. There I was, cushy job, clean bill of health as I approached middle age. Full of bravado. I thought it would be an adventure, I suppose. Chance to prove my manhood, maybe come back with a handsome scar and a story. And oh, it felt so good to hear the pretty girls cheer as we boarded the boats. I remember a young woman grabbing me and kissing my cheek on the pier, telling me how tremendously brave I was. I can still recall the smell of her perfume. I told her I'd be back for a proper kiss soon." He chuckled. "I don't even know her name. She probably kissed a hundred soldiers that day."

"That first year, it all seemed so noble," Crawford said. "I wanted to sign up — seemed like the right thing to do. But my wife begged me not to. We had the shop to manage, she said, but it was more than that. She knew. She always was the insightful one in our relationship."

"War is just advertising," Brauer said, lighting another cigarette and offering the case around. "You need enough people to buy in to make it viable. So you start by playing on their sense of pride. You make them feel brave and strong and patriotic, sell the idea of being part of something. *Enlist today, your country needs you.* Don't walk to the recruiting office, run — and while you're at it, bring all your chums along with you. And you'll attract a lot of consumers that way — providing their wives don't talk them out of it, of course — but it's still not enough, not when the churn is so high.

"So you change tactics, start cultivating a guilty conscience instead. The people who didn't immediately buy in, well, they must be cowards. You're not a coward, are you? Better enlist to prove it. Build enough brand loyalty and before long, everyone around those holdouts will start calling them cowards, too. You're in or you're out, and shame on you if you're out. It's vulgar, but that's war for you."

He shrugged, tilting his head back to blow a plume of smoke into the frigid morning air and wafting it away with his hand.

"I'd be careful with talk like that," Price said, an edge of unease in his voice. "They've put men against the wall for less."

"Oh don't get me wrong, I think it's quite brilliant," Brauer said. "I'm a criminal defense barrister — I appreciate a good marketing strategy when I see one. My entire job back home is creating a desire for people to do something they don't want to do — believe something

they're not inclined to believe. I would have been *exceptional* in the propaganda department, if I do say so myself. Would have gotten you lot to enlist faster than you did, that's for sure."

"Did I ever tell you all why I signed up?" Zeller said, suddenly. He had been staring at his boots, but now he looked up, his gaze falling upon each man in turn before settling on Brauer. "I was part of a Pals Battalion. All the lads from the mill — must have been two, three hundred of us. Foreman was furious when he found out. Whole workforce up and gone, just like that."

He shook his head at the memory, stirring his cold tea with his finger.

"We called ourselves the Blackburn Brigade. I figured it'd be fun, pitching in with my mates. We all did — we were laughing and taking bets on who would kill the most Krauts as we walked to the recruitment office. It felt like a game. I even said that the war better not end before we really had a chance to get stuck in. And when I stepped off the train in France, well… I'd never been out of Blackburn before, much less England. And there were so many of us. How could we possibly lose with that many people? It felt like all of England was out there. Half of Scotland too, for that matter."

Zeller paused to sip his tea. His face was hard.

"We didn't know it at the time but the generals were strengthening our numbers for a big push. ' *The Somme Offensive* ,' they called it. That didn't mean anything to me. All I knew was that the shelling never bleeding stopped that first week. They were trying to soften up the German defenses — fat lot of good it did. Then they ordered us to go over the top.

"That first day of the battle, we lost more than three-quarters of our platoon. Gone, just like that."

He snapped his fingers, the sound loud as a gunshot in the quiet morning.

"I watched friends I'd known since primary school cut in half by machine gun fire. How are you supposed to carry on living after seeing something like that? Some of them couldn't. One morning, I found a lad who'd grown up two doors down from me dead in the trenches with his rifle under his chin and his brains blown all over the firing step. As for the rest, Jerry got 'em all eventually, one by one by one. Guess the other side was playing, too."

He drained his cup, grimacing at the taste. His hand was shaking.

"I'm the only one left now. The last of the Blackburn Brigade. I win."

Brauer cleared his throat awkwardly. Price put his hand on Zeller's shoulder. The other man shrugged it off and walked away. As he disappeared around a bend in the trench, Will wondered for the first time how old Zeller was. Younger than him by a few years, he thought, perhaps twenty-five, his body still lean and wiry with youth. But the war had aged him. You only had to look at Zeller's eyes to know that.

A heavy silence followed his retreat. To everyone's surprise, it was Bernadone who broke it by climbing to his feet and removing his battered notebook from his breast pocket.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to read something to you all,” he said.

Brauer gestured for him to continue, looking faintly relieved for the change of subject. Bernadone opened the book and flipped through until he found the right page, marked with a faded black ribbon. He cleared his throat, stood a little straighter, and began to read:

When I think of England, I think of the tree

Behind my small house

Where the woodpeckers come knocking every spring,

And the blueberry jam my aunt would bring

When she visited from Kent,

Made with love and arthritic fingers, spooned onto brie

Or else spread generously on toast.

These are the things I wish to remember

In sedate moments

Leaving the troubles of the day behind

Like a coat discarded in the entranceway

After rain.

So when I think of France, if I ever leave,

I shall try not to think of the mud and the rats,

Of bodies broken, blood shed,

Nor of the cold that pierced skin and bone

So deeply

I often wondered: Was I dead, yet waking?

Given the choice, I shan’t think of the rotting body

I put my foot through o n march in the winter

Or the eyes of a friend who died with a hole in his head

And six more in his chest.

No.

I shall think of them alive and vital beside me:

My fellow Englishmen,

Talking about nothing. Airing grievances.

Laughing.

If I can leave the rest behind, I'll think only of them

In sedate moments

As I stare at the ceiling in my small house

Where that tree still stands outside my window

And the woodpeckers will continue to knock

Even if I can't answer.

No one spoke for a moment when he was finished. Bernadone closed his notebook and tucked it back into his pocket, sat down.

"That was really beautiful, Peter," Crawford said.

Bernadone ducked his head. "It's a work in progress."

"Remember us when you're famous, won't you old chap?" Brauer said, nudging Bernadone's foot with his own.

Bernadone opened his mouth, but whatever he intended to say was forgotten as the sound of purposeful footsteps reached them. Lieutenant Tier appeared around the corner, a hessian sack slung over one shoulder.

"Why, it's Father Christmas himself," Price exclaimed. "Though you're less jolly than I imagined you'd be."

Tier's expression was flat. Reaching into the sack, he tossed a crude khaki-colored mask at Price.

"Learn how to put it on," he said as he moved down the line, passing out the unwelcome gifts. "We'll begin drills tomorrow."

Will turned his mask over in his hands. It was an eerie-looking thing, with round glass eyelets and a tin canister where the mouth should have been. Straps dangled limply from the back.

“Not the worst Christmas present I’ve ever received,” Price muttered when Tier had disappeared around the next bend in the trench. “It’s certainly up there, though.”

No one smiled. “What does this mean?” Crawford said, turning to Brauer.

The Lance Corporal was staring down at his own mask. His face was very grave.

“Nothing good.”

*

Christmas passed. Life, such as it was, carried on.

For five days, Will’s company did little else but dig. It was slow, back-breaking work. The flutter of snow on Christmas morning had given way to a bitter chill that numbed the fingers and hardened the ground, as if in protest against the fresh scars being carved into the bleeding torso of France. But the shovels never stopped moving.

By the time New Year’s Eve rolled around, Will’s knuckles had become so swollen and red that he struggled to hold his needle steady as he patched the holes in his gloves. But at least his feet were dry for once. The mud was frozen solid.

Near midnight, he was roused from a thin sleep to take over the watch from Private Price. The sandbags were cold against his forehead as he leaned against them to peer through the loophole. Beyond, No Man’s Land sparkled with frost in the moonlight. The sky was so clear and bright that any officer would have to be mad to send his men out on the attack that night. That didn’t make a raid impossible — madness and blatant disregard for human life were hardly unheard of in the upper echelons of the army — but it seemed unlikely.

“Quiet one tonight, I reckon.”

Will didn’t look up. He knew Price’s voice.

“I thought you were relieved.”

“I was. My beauty sleep evades me. Aren’t *you* relieved to have some company?”

Will said nothing. Price observed him for a moment longer, then sat down on the firing step beside him.

“You’re a conscript too, right?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do before all this madness?”

“I taught.”

“I thought teachers were exempt.”

“The essential ones are. Criminology becomes a luxury when half the country is off killing abroad.”

“Bad luck. I was a beekeeper. Guess the half that stayed behind will have to do without honey in their porridge until the Kaiser packs it in.”

Price chuckled to himself. Will kept his gaze firmly planted on No Man’s Land, watching the layer of ground mist drift slowly across the frozen shell holes. It was so quiet that he could hear two rats fighting over their food. Will was grateful that he couldn’t see them for the mist. They were almost certainly eating what was left of a soldier.

Price began to fidget, blowing on his fingers and rubbing his hands together to warm them, glancing around. Will waited patiently for him to continue. It was obvious that Price had something he needed to get off his chest. Will had observed enough interrogations during his time on the force to know that people tended to spill their guts if you just left them with their own thoughts for long enough. His watch had barely begun. He could wait.

“I saw you,” Price said, suddenly, his words ringing in the stillness like a slap. He seemed shocked by his own declaration, lowering his voice to a furtive whisper. “By the lake. I saw you. With him.”

Will felt himself stiffen. Whatever he had expected Price to say, it had not been that. His oldest and most persistent fear rose in his chest like bile.

There had always been rumors about him. Murmurings among the other teachers about his bachelor lifestyle. Snide comments from his peers at Oxford about his feminine frame, his delicate face. Even as a child, the other boys had sensed his otherness, chased him away with thrown rocks and cruel chides. It had almost been a relief to pick up and move when the work dried up for his father. He never left friends behind.

Over time, he’d learned how to dispel the rumors, or at least keep them at bay. He’d grown out his beard. He’d moved in with a woman. Worn clothing that was entirely unremarkable, that the eye slid over in a crowd. Will Graham knew better than most that it was dangerous to be observed.

But he’d grown careless.

He’d been *seen* .

Without lifting his eyes from the loophole, he said softly “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, of course you do. You weren’t exactly subtle about it.”

Will blinked but said nothing. Tears swam at the edges of his vision. He was grateful to have his back to Price.

Price blew on his fingers again and tucked his hands under his armpits, peering up and down the trench before continuing. “You have nothing to worry about with me, though. People in glass houses would be wise not to throw stones, if you catch my drift.”

Finally, Will looked at him. Price raised an eyebrow.

“I’m surprised you didn’t know. Subtlety was never exactly my forte, either.”

Will turned back to the loophole, his pulse throbbing in his throat, but slowing now. “I suppose I wasn’t looking too hard.”

“Gee, thanks,” Price said. “Luckily for your sake, no one else has been looking that hard, either — but they will if you continue to be so brazen about it. A man go to to prison for less than that, you know.”

Will pressed his forehead harder into the sandbags, feeling the cold burlap scrape against his skin. “I know.”

“What on earth were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking.” Will sighed. He thought about the way Lecter’s skin had looked in the moonlight. How it had felt when it brushed his own. “It just… sort of happened.”

He could sense Price examining him. “How long have you known?”

Will shrugged. “I suppose I’ve always known. I’ve just never acted on it before.”

“Never? Even before the war?”

“No.”

“Didn’t you go to Cambridge? I assumed that was all you lot got up to.”

“Oxford. And I tended to spend my free time in the library. Alone.”

Price exhaled. “Well, I suppose I’m glad that you’re finally having some fun, dear fellow, but there’s a time and a place for it. That place is not out in the open a stone’s throw away from where your commanding officer is counting sheep.”

“It was a lapse in judgment. It won’t happen again.” Will swallowed. “Besides. I doubt I’ll ever see him again.”

“Never say never,” Price said, tilting his head back to look at the stars. “I like to think I’ll run into Private Zeller when we’re back in England some day. He’s a good kid, didn’t deserve any of this — not that any of us did, mind you. I’ll buy him a sherry at the local pub and we’ll reminisce about the good old days when we were dodging bullets in the freezing mud of France. He’ll be married by then, of course, and I’ll make excuses for why I’m not. Perhaps we’ll exchange letters from time to time until he gets too busy with his family and forgets to reply. That’s okay. He’ll want to put all this behind him and I won’t begrudge him for that. That doctor of yours, though… Maybe he’ll wait for you, after.”

Despite himself, Will felt a slight smile itching at the corner of his mouth at the thought. “I barely know him.”

Price smiled back, and in that smile, Will caught a glimpse of his own future — of a lifetime of carefulness and sustained loneliness, punctuated by stolen moments of joy.

“You will,” Price said.

He pushed his sleeve up then to expose his wristlet. Even beneath the shrapnel guard, the radium-painted dials of the trench watch emitted a faint green glow.

“It’s past midnight,” Price said, softly. “1917. Let’s hope this year is a little kinder. To all of us.”

Will didn’t respond. After a moment more, Price climbed stiffly to his feet.

“I suppose I’d better try to get some sleep. You’ll remember what I said, won’t you? I’ve seen good men go down for ‘indecency.’ And you’re a good man, Will.”

Will turned to look at him again. Price’s usually jovial face looked deathly serious in the moonlight.

“Good night, Jim.”

Price raised two fingers to the brim of his helmet in a mock salute. “Nighty night, lovebird,” he said as he walked away, leaving Will alone to watch the dark.

Chapter End Notes

A few notes on this chapter:

1. Brauer is referencing the 1914 Christmas Truce, an infamous unofficial ceasefire that occurred during the first year of the war.

2. Pals Battalions were a real enlistment technique and were eventually scrapped because they would utterly decimate the populations of small communities.

3. You'll have to suspend your disbelief a little with Peter's poetry. I am no poet.

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